

Trade tokens keep history alive

By Roger Boye

IN ITS heyday early this century, what was once the hamlet of St. Paul in Fayette County, Ill., had two stores, a post office, church, school, doctor's office, creamery, and a saw mill.

Except for the church, all is gone today. Altho St. Paul still makes some Illinois roadmaps, the hamlet's plat is a field of grain.

But some of the history of St. Paul remains today as part of the trade tokens issued by one of the two store owners about 1915.

Numismatists who collect such tokens often become experts in local history. Trade tokens are the unofficial coinage of business owners and give collectors an insight into the history of a

town and the history of the times in which they were issued.

Trade tokens were popular in the early 20th century, altho some merchants used them since before the Civil War. Merchants issued them to advertise their business. Tokens paid the farmer for produce and meat, for example, and also were used to make change in times of coin shortages. The person receiving a token, of course, was forced to "spend it" at the place of business he received it.

In addition, saloon keepers used trade tokens to pay winners of card games. Owners of pool halls often paid winners with them. Many tokens issued by merchants in the Chicago area

were used for gambling.

Tokens were issued in various amounts, usually 5, 10, 25, 50 cents, or \$1 in trade. Their composition also varied: aluminum, brass, copper, cardboard, plastic, wood, zinc, for some examples.

They exist in many shapes and sizes, ranging, for example, from a horseshoe shape to an oblong shape.

In his book, "Trade Tokens of Illinois," Ore H. Vacketta of Westville, Ill., compiled listings of thousands of tokens, by town. The book includes introductions written by, among others, trade token experts Charles Lipsky of Galesburg and Ben Odesser of Chicago.

Altho it is difficult to estimate the value of them to

collectors, values in Vacketta's book range from 10 cents to \$5 and up, depending on the approximate number of tokens known to exist.

Some token collectors try to obtain one from every town in a given area. Others collect odd denominations, such as 7½ cents or 22 cents. And, according to Virginia Culver, past president of the American Numismatic Association, others might concentrate on tokens good for a special service, such as "good for a hair cut," "good for a cord of wood," or "good for one night's lodging."

Tokens issued by merchants and businessmen are just one of many types collected.